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Those British Spy Tales

The latest British "spy scandal" is not so much a new affair as a wallowing in old embarrassments. The late Sir Roger Hollis, on the basis of what is known so far, should not yet be added to the infamous list of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, Kim Philby and (as of 16 months ago) Anthony Blunt, the last having been unmasked belatedly to end a string of honors as the Queen's art adviser.

Prime Minister Thatcher last week denied in the House of Commons that anything had been proven against Sir Roger, though he had been investigated after his decade of service (1956-1965) as the head of MI 5, responsible for domestic counter-intelligence. He seems, to most of those who looked into the matter, not to have been a KGB "mole" deeply burrowed in the British intelligence establishment, even if Mrs. Thatcher conceded that 100 per cent proof of his innocence is not possible. With that finding, she ordered a fresh review of security procedures to see if any changes are in order.

The renewed fuss over suspicions of treason in British intelligence ranks was touched off by the serialization in the Daily Mail of a book, "Their Trade Is Treachery," by Chapman Pincher, a veteran reporter with a record of sensational exposes. The Hollis story is reminiscent of a John Le Carre novel, down to the use of an MI 5 "safe house" for the interrogation of the retired official, who "never broke." The high-level suspect was twice exonerated, once in a review of the matter after his death in 1973. The Pincher revelation is that there were such suspicions, and not everyone's were put to rest by the investigations.

Another Pincher allegation is that a one-time chairman of the Labor Party, the late John Driberg, was a double agent for both British and Soviet intelligence, reporting to the Russians about the personal lives of British officials. Mrs. Thatcher did not address herself to that less momentous but also dated charge. The suggestion of spies passing on stories of sexual indiscretions is more redolent of the Profumo scandal than of Philby spending long evenings on the premises of a trusting CIA.

An important fact should be kept sight of in considering these damning stories about what another British newspaper called "defenseless dead men." It was all long ago. The Burgess-Maclean-Philby catastrophe marked an earlier era of Cold War espionage. The memories are bothersome, and the idea of such privileged men betraying their own decent society for the furtherance of Stalinism is as scary as it is mystifying. The guardians of the West's intelligence secrets obviously can take nothing for granted.

But these old horrors should not be confused with the question of the present state of security in the British intelligence services, and the implications of this for cooperation with the United States and other allies in the field. We'll await an updated word from Mrs. Thatcher on that score.

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